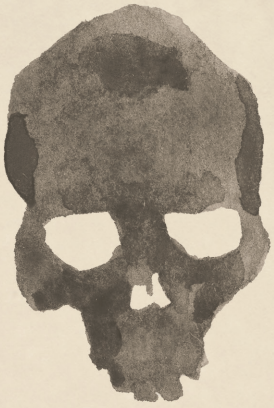
Jim Henson's™
THE STORYTELLER™
Tale Four of Four
Witches
ARCHAIA™
JEFF STOKELY



VASILISSA the BEAUTIFUL

Based on the unproduced ***The Storyteller*** teleplay written by

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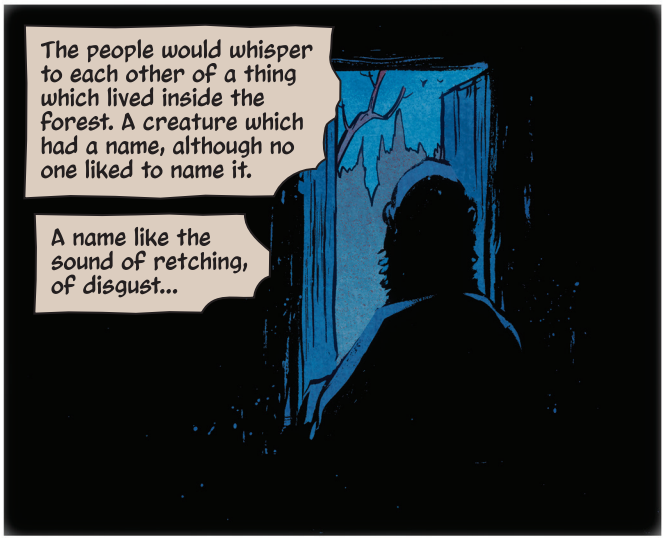
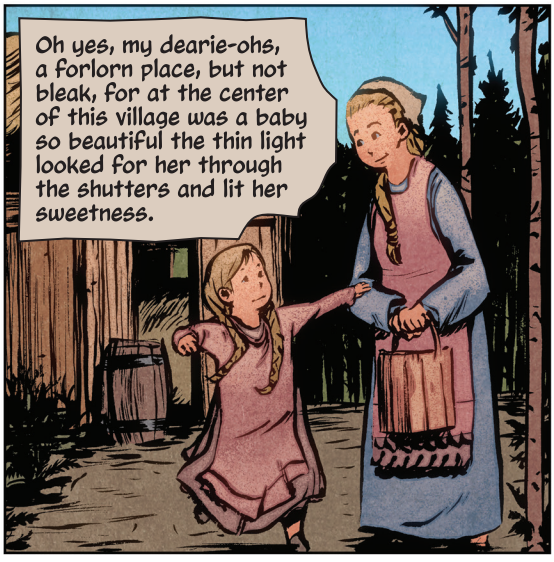
Once upon a time, long winters ago, at the very edge of the world, was a village which God had forgotten.

A few lonely houses stood there, fenced by a forest so deep and so dark that the sky stopped above it for fear of getting lost.
Oh, from time to time fools wandered in, trailing string behind them...

But they never came back.


The people would whisper to each other of a thing which lived inside the forest. A creature which had a name, although no one liked to name it.
A name like the sound of retching, of disgust...

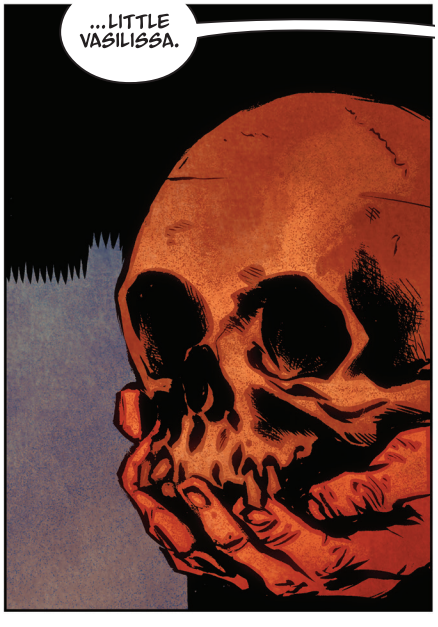
Baba.
Yaga.


Oh yes, my dearie-ohs, a forlorn place, but not bleak, for at the center of this village was a baby so beautiful the thin light looked for her through the shutters and lit her sweetness.

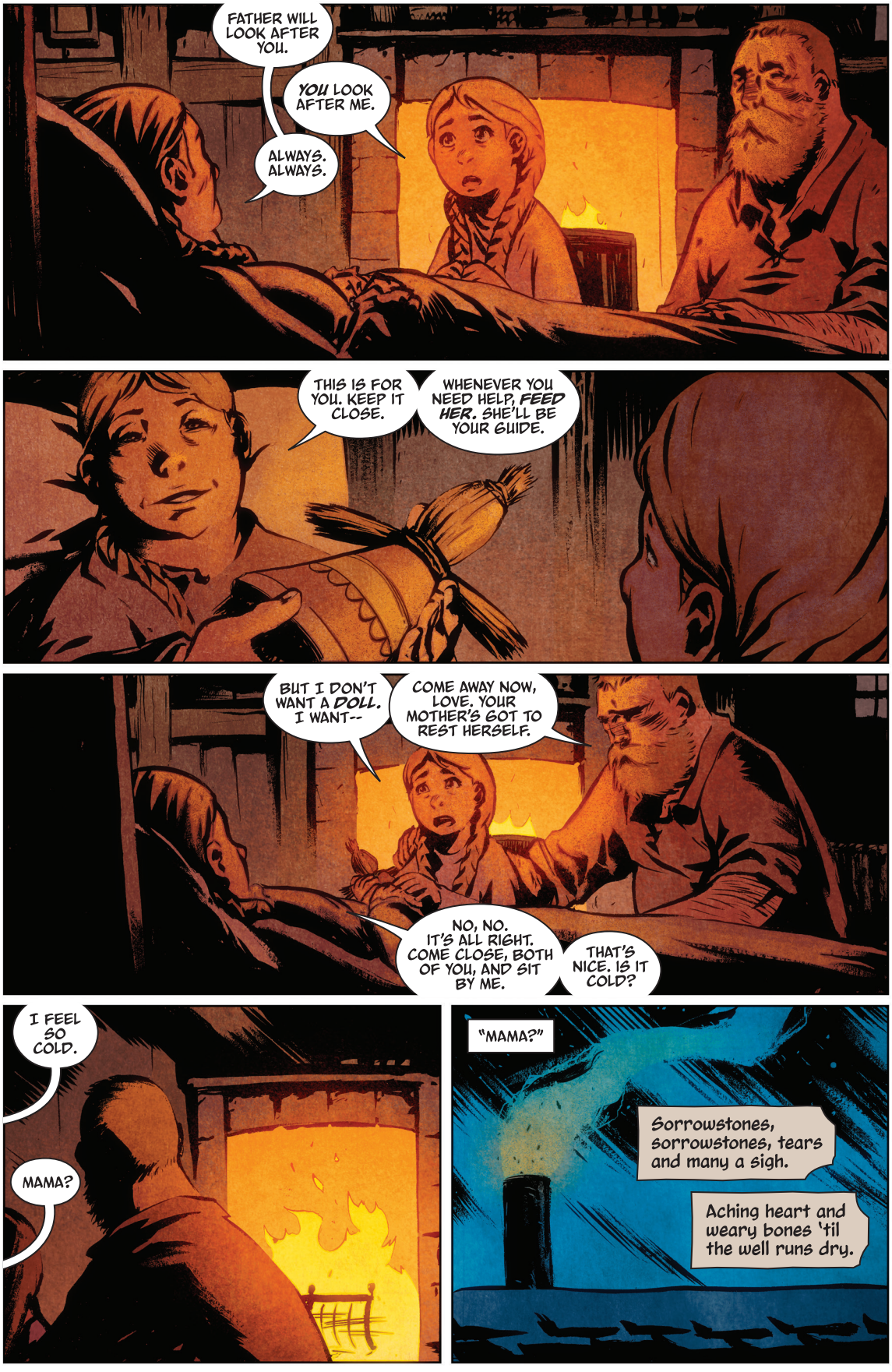
There she is with her smile of honey and mother and father, and never was a family more family.

And this love warmed the village and kindled it. Spreading happiness.
Such a precious thing, all child, all wonder.

The village child...


...LITTLE VASILISSA.

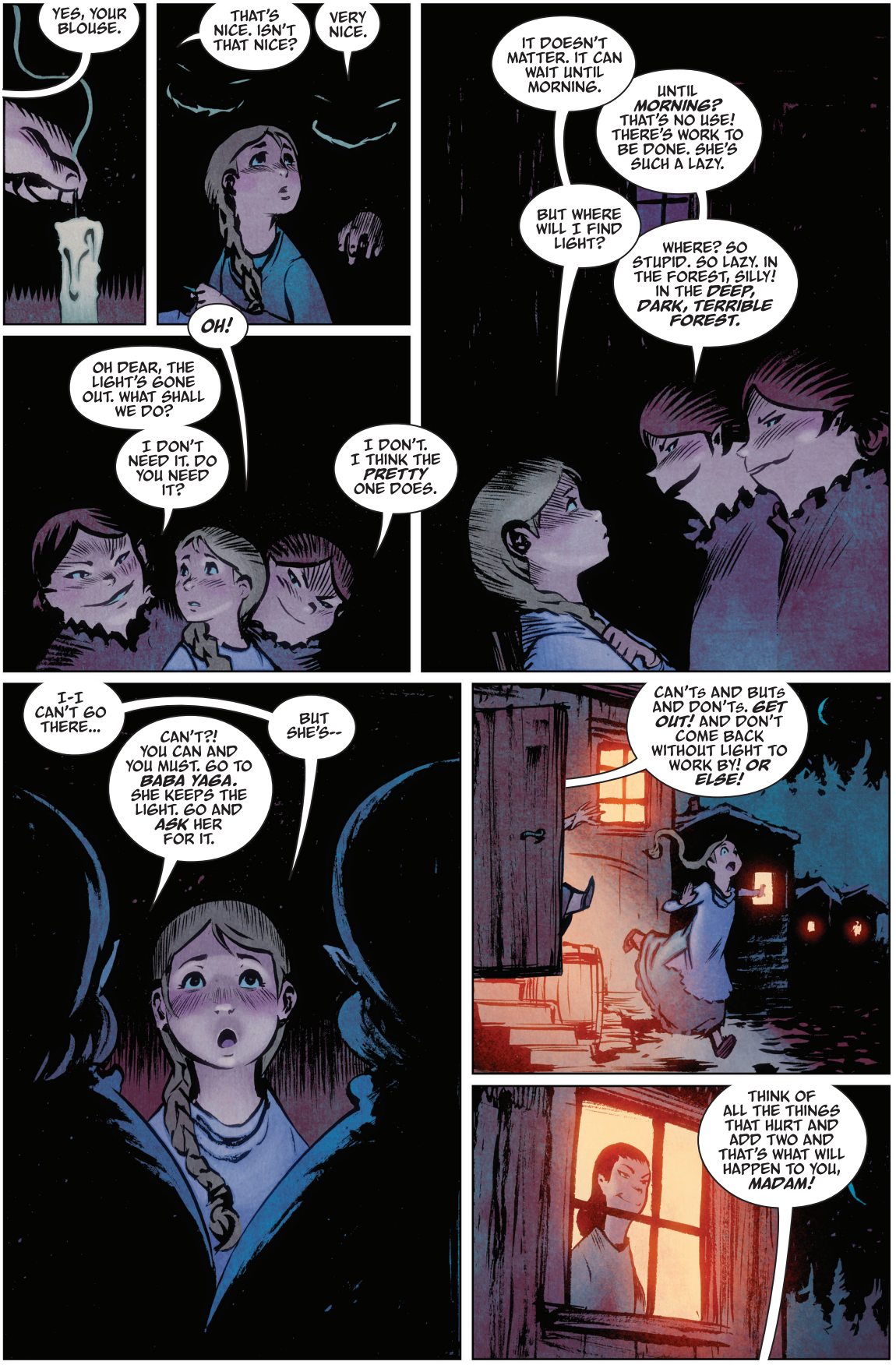
AND SO IT GOES, THIS HARVEST CHILD BLOSSOMING, HAIR THE COLOR OF THE CORN. A CHILD WHO SINGS, UNTROUBLED, SPILLING OVER WITH JOY.
OH, YES. MARVELOUS.
UNTIL ONE DAY INSIDE OF THIS WARM HOME...
...SICKNESS COMES AND LAYS ITS COLD HAND ON THE MOTHER'S FOREHEAD.
The father and child sorrow through the nights-long vigil.
For this is a place God has forgotten and nothing good may flourish long.


FATHER WILL LOOK AFTER YOU.
YOU LOOK AFTER ME.
ALWAYS. ALWAYS.
THIS IS FOR YOU. KEEP IT CLOSE.
WHENEVER YOU NEED HELP, FEED HER. SHE'LL BE YOUR GUIDE.
BUT I DON'T WANT A DOLL. I WANT--
COME AWAY NOW, LOVE. YOUR MOTHER'S GOT TO REST HERSELF.
NO, NO. IT'S ALL RIGHT. COME CLOSE, BOTH OF YOU, AND SIT BY ME.
THAT'S NICE. IS IT COLD?
I FEEL SO COLD.
MAMA?
"MAMA?"
Sorrowstones, sorrowstones, tears and many a sigh.
Aching heart and weary bones 'til the well runs dry.

Such cruelty makes you wonder, where it comes from.
Vasilissa gazed out and decided cruelty lived there, in that damp and black forest.
The years passed on but she hardly noticed. All drifting by as so many clouds, until one day...
Her father met a widow.
He had done with grieving and he wanted a wife again to warm his back at nights and to mind his daughter.
But what a choice, my dearies!
A bat and her two daughters flapped into Vasilissa's life.
With them the cold walked in, and underneath their honey and treacle and "Darling Vasilissa," our pretty could feel their poison leaking out.

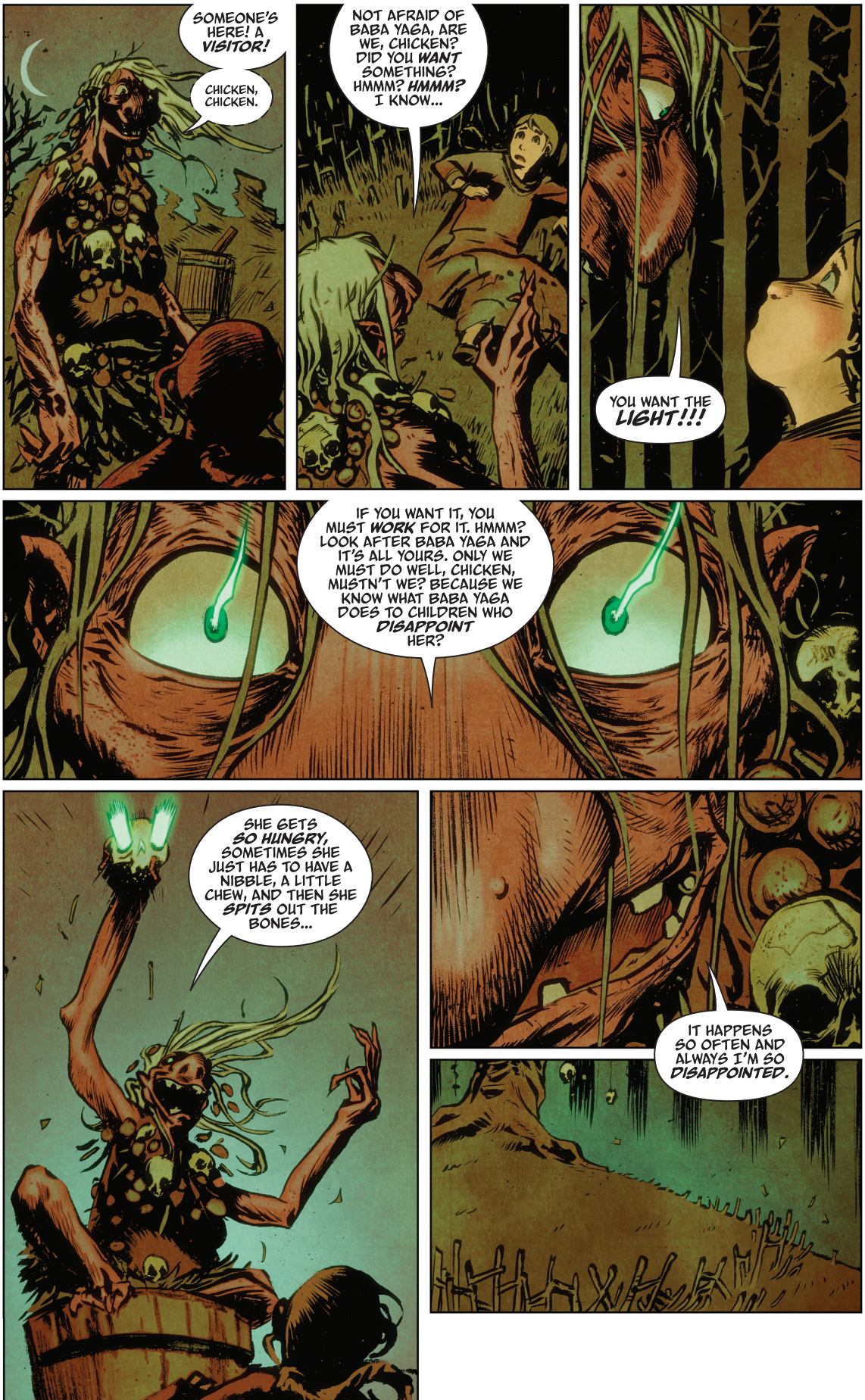
And so they settled into their new roost and fed their fat faces while Vasilissa wore her knuckles white.
Bloated, they filled the tiny house...and oh, what appetites the bats had!
Each scrap they ate fueled their hatred for the beautiful girl.
Oh dearies, never was a poor girl so burdened. She prayed.
WASH MY CLOTHES! COOK MY DINNER!
SWEEP THE YARD! FETCH THE WATER!
IRON THE HOUSE! SWEEP MY FOOD!
COOK MY CLOTHES! FEED ME! FEED ME!
But this was a place which God had forgotten. At the edge of the world.

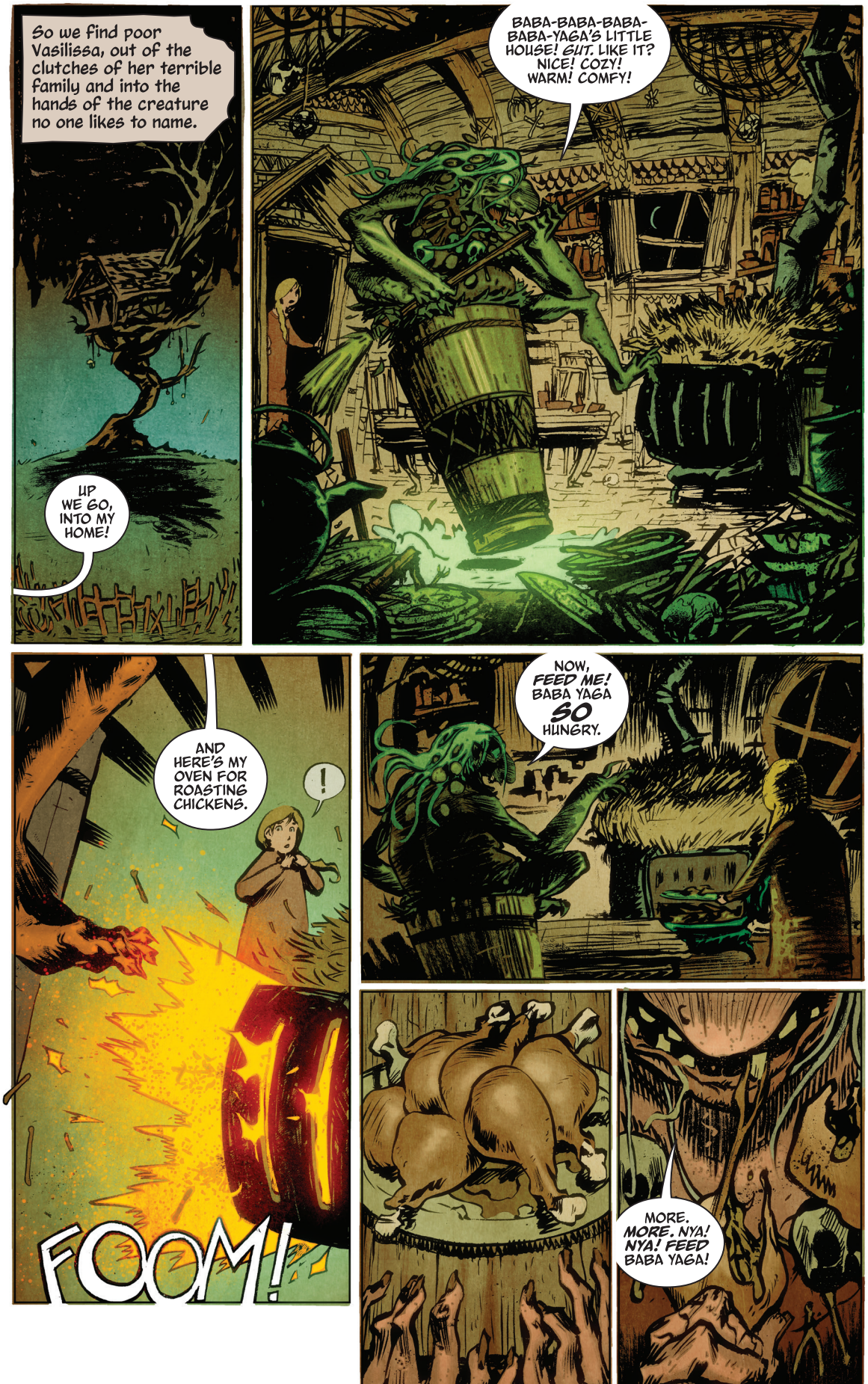
AND THIS GOES ON UNTIL THE POISON SIMMERS UP IN THE BATS AND DRIPS FROM THEM. THEY BROOD IN THE DARK WITH THEIR MOTHER AND PLAN PLANS.
THEY HATE. AND THE HATE MAKES THEM VILER THAN EVER.
GRRR
Oh yes, dearies, the bats come up with a scheme. The mother sends father away on a journey and no sooner is he out of earshot than they set out to work on their plot.
Horrible.
IT'S TO BED FOR ME. PUT OUT THE LIGHTS. LEAVE ONE FOR THE PRETTY TO WORK BY. BUT NOT TOO MUCH LIGHTS, EH.
OTHERWISE, SHE'LL GET SO VAIN GAZING AT HERSELF. 'NIGHT, DARLINGS.
'NIGHT-NIGHT, MUMMY.
AND DO WHAT YOU MUST DO.
SEWING, ARE WE, PRETTY ONE?


YES, YOUR BLOUSE.
THAT'S NICE. ISN'T THAT NICE?
VERY NICE.
OH!
OH DEAR, THE LIGHT'S GONE OUT. WHAT SHALL WE DO?
I DON'T NEED IT. DO YOU NEED IT?
I DON'T. I THINK THE PRETTY ONE DOES.
IT DOESN'T MATTER. IT CAN WAIT UNTIL MORNING.
UNTIL MORNING? THAT'S NO USE! THERE'S WORK TO BE DONE. SHE'S SUCH A LAZY.
BUT WHERE WILL I FIND LIGHT?
WHERE? SO STUPID. SO LAZY. IN THE FOREST, SILLY! IN THE DEEP, DARK, TERRIBLE FOREST.
I-I CAN'T GO THERE...
CAN'T?! YOU CAN AND YOU MUST. GO TO BABA YAGA. SHE KEEPS THE LIGHT. GO AND ASK HER FOR IT.
BUT SHE'S--
CAN'TS AND BUTS AND DON'TS. GET OUT! AND DON'T COME BACK WITHOUT LIGHT TO WORK BY! OR ELSE!
THINK OF ALL THE THINGS THAT HURT AND ADD TWO AND THAT'S WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO YOU, MADAM!

Into the forest's black secrets...
Past hope, past courage...
Past everything...
...where fear rules.
KRA
KSSSH
As the trees splinter and sway around Vasilissa...

...the sky cracks open and spits out a witch!
BABA YAGA!
KA-BOOM


SOMEONE'S HERE! A VISITOR!
CHICKEN, CHICKEN.
NOT AFRAID OF BABA YAGA, ARE WE, CHICKEN? DID YOU WANT SOMETHING? HMMM? HMMM? I KNOW...
YOU WANT THE LIGHT!!!
IF YOU WANT IT, YOU MUST WORK FOR IT. HMMM? LOOK AFTER BABA YAGA AND IT'S ALL YOURS. ONLY WE MUST DO WELL, CHICKEN, MUSTN'T WE? BECAUSE WE KNOW WHAT BABA YAGA DOES TO CHILDREN WHO DISAPPOINT HER?
SHE GETS SO HUNGRY, SOMETIMES SHE JUST HAS TO HAVE A NIBBLE, A LITTLE CHEW, AND THEN SHE SPITS OUT THE BONES...
IT HAPPENS SO OFTEN AND ALWAYS I'M SO DISAPPOINTED.

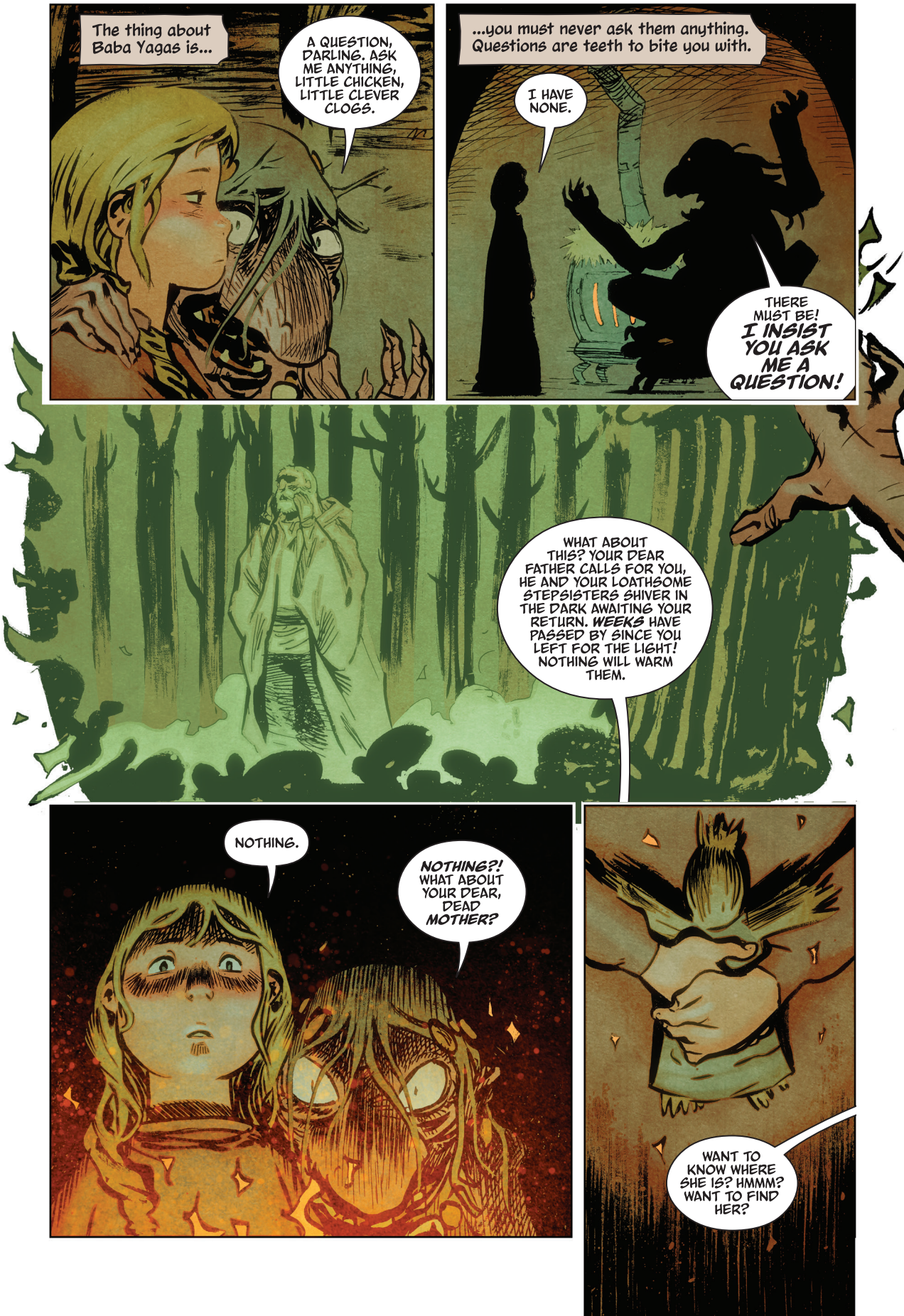

So we find poor Vasilissa, out of the clutches of her terrible family and into the hands of the creature no one likes to name.
UP WE GO, INTO MY HOME!
BABA-BABA-BABA-BABA-YAGA'S LITTLE HOUSE! GUT. LIKE IT? NICE! COZY! WARM! COMFY!
AND HERE'S MY OVEN FOR ROASTING CHICKENS.
!
FOOM!
NOW, FEED ME! BABA YAGA SO HUNGRY.
MORE. MORE. NYA! NYA! FEED BABA YAGA!

And for what feels like hours, Vasilissa shovels food into the witch's mouth. Yet still...
ALWAYS SO HUNGRY! MORE!
THAT'S ALL THERE IS.
HMMM. HMMM... NOW BABA GOES TO BED. AND IN THE MORNING WE'LL SEE ABOUT YOUR LIGHT, CHICKEN. BUT FIRST YOU'LL CLEAN AND WASH MY CLOTHES AND COOK MY DINNER AND HMMM...WHAT'S DIFFICULT?
YOU CAN SORT THE WEEDS FROM THE WHEAT IN MY GRAIN BINS. THAT'S IMPOSSIBLE.
BUT IF IT'S NOT DONE I'LL HAVE TO EAT YOU.
SUCH SOFT FLESH...SORT THE WHEAT... NYAFF...SO TENDER...
WHENEVER YOU NEED HELP...
...FEED HER.

LITTLE DOLL--FOOD FOR YOU. EAT AND TELL ME WHAT TO DO.
And so, with the essence of kindness, our pretty settles to sleep, hugged by love, embraced by peace. Such a sleep, so deep, so calm, so cosseted.
IT'S ALL CLEAN--IT'S-- THE WHEAT IS SORTED!
ALL THAT'S LEFT IS THE COOKING.
And so the day passes, blessed, our pretty Vasilissa fills the home with song, for now she has a secret, a comfort. A precious gift from her mother.

But such warmth is fleeting. A sigh washes over and bears a black cloud. For now, she returns.
In she glides and finds delicate Vasilissa, caught up in her silks.
HMMM... TIDY. HMMM... CLEAN. HMMM... SMELLS NICE.
DONE IT! CLEVER, CHICKEN.
VERY CLEVER. SNIFF.
HO, MY SERVANTS! TAKE THE WHEAT! TAKE THE WHEAT AND GRIND IT!

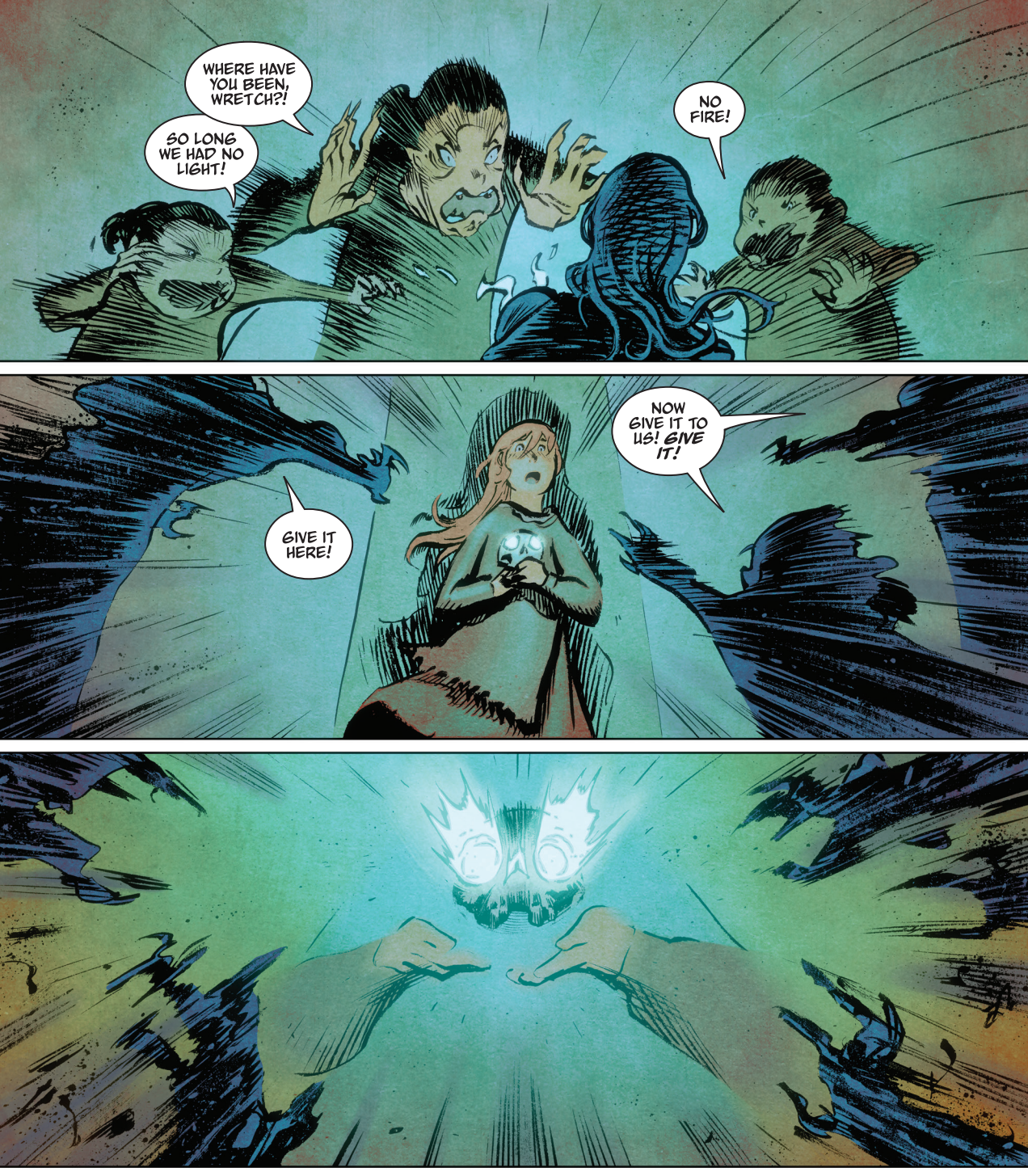
GUT GUT. CLEVER VASILISSA. CLEVER BABA YAGA. NOW FEED ME, CHICKEN. I'M SO HUNGRY!
And so the feeding ritual begins once again.
Grease and gristle and bone and bird.
And still precious Vasilissa obeys. She daren't ask for the light.
HMM. GUT GUT. VERY NICE. BABA SLEEPS NOW. SUCH A GOOD CHICKEN, BUT STILL WORK TO BE DONE TOMORROW. MUCH TO CLEAN, AND ANOTHER TASK FOR YOU.
SOMEONE'S PUT DIRT IN MY POPPY SEEDS. NASTY. CLEAN THEM, PRECIOUS. ONE BY ONE.
THAT'S NOT FAIR. ANOTHER TASK!
NOTHING'S FAIR IN THIS PLACE THAT GOD HAS FORGOTTEN. NOTHING'S KIND.
SAVE FOR THE DOLL, AND THAT NIGHT OUR PRETTY FEEDS IT AGAIN. "LITTLE DOLL, FOOD FOR YOU. EAT AND TELL ME WHAT TO DO." AND SO THE DOLL HELPS VASILISSA SLEEP AND CLEAN AND SMILE ONCE MORE.
AND ONCE MORE BABA YAGA RETURNS TO FIND THE TASK COMPLETE. SUMMONING HER SERVANTS WHO CRUSH THE SEEDS TO PURE OIL. "GUT GUT," SHE MUTTERS.


The thing about Baba Yagas is...
A QUESTION, DARLING. ASK ME ANYTHING, LITTLE CHICKEN, LITTLE CLEVER CLOGS.
...you must never ask them anything. Questions are teeth to bite you with.
I HAVE NONE.
THERE MUST BE! I INSIST YOU ASK ME A QUESTION!
WHAT ABOUT THIS? YOUR DEAR FATHER CALLS FOR YOU, HE AND YOUR LOATHSOME STEPSISTERS SHIVER IN THE DARK AWAITING YOUR RETURN. WEEKS HAVE PASSED BY SINCE YOU LEFT FOR THE LIGHT! NOTHING WILL WARM THEM.
NOTHING.
NOTHING?! WHAT ABOUT YOUR DEAR, DEAD MOTHER?
WANT TO KNOW WHERE SHE IS? HMMM? WANT TO FIND HER?

MY MOTHER IS DEAD. AND RESTS IN PEACE.
WHAT A STUPID THING YOU ARE! YOU WILL NEVER KNOW ANYTHING! MORE A FOOL YOU FOR ASKING NOTHING!
I'M BORED WITH YOU. GET OUT! AND TAKE YOUR BLASTED LIGHT WITH YOU!
BE GONE! AND SEE IF LITTLE CHICKEN CAN SURVIVE THE JOURNEY HOME!
SHOOF
THIEF! THE SKULL!
A RIDDLE. ANSWER AND GO FREE. BUT ANSWER WRONGLY AND MY HORSE WILL TRAMPLE YOU AND TATTER YOUR SKIN 'TIL IT HANGS LIKE WHITE LEAVES ON THE BONES OF MY TREES.
NO! IT WAS GIVEN TO ME!
WHO AM I?

YOU, SIR, ARE BABA YAGA'S SERVANT.
YOU ARE HER DARKNESS. HER DEEPEST NIGHT.
AN OFFERING. A LITTLE BEARER OF LIGHT.
A RIDDLE! ANSWER AND GO FREE. DON'T AND MY HORSE WILL TRAMPLE YOU TO BLOOD-STAINED STRAW UNDER ITS HOOVES.
WHO AM I?
YOU, SIR, ARE BABA YAGA'S DAWN! YOU ARE THE SILVER OF HER MORNINGS.
CLEVER GIRL. BABA YAGA'S GIRL. I WILL SHORTEN YOUR WAY.

WHO AM I?
YOU, SIR, ARE BABA YAGA'S DAY!
YOU ARE THE WARMTH OF HER NOONS.
TRULY BABA YAGA'S GIRL! COME UP AND I WILL SHORTEN YOUR WAY.
On and on they hurtle through the mist, hour after hour, before dawn's breaking...
...and the rider reins in at the edge of the forest and sets her down.
NOW FOLLOW YOUR LIGHT, MY LITTLE SISTER.



The gift of light. It *shines* in the darkness for some, but its eyes search out the blackest hearts and burn them to cinders.

Slowly, the dawn comes and finds Vasilissa. No more skull, no more bats.
And for the first time in an age, the sun touches her heart and lightens it as she sees her father.
Together they could look forward, renewed, released, to the future.
Vasilissa remembered the doll...but it wasn't there. And she realized that the time for help was gone. The time for being a child had passed.
As for Baba Yaga, who knows where her house landed. I've not seen her since and nor have they, a long way away, at the edge of the world, in a place which God remembered.
AND IS THAT THE SAME SKULL?
THIS? NO...
I USE THIS TO KEEP THE BREAD COOL!
THE END

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THE STORYTELLER™

Witches

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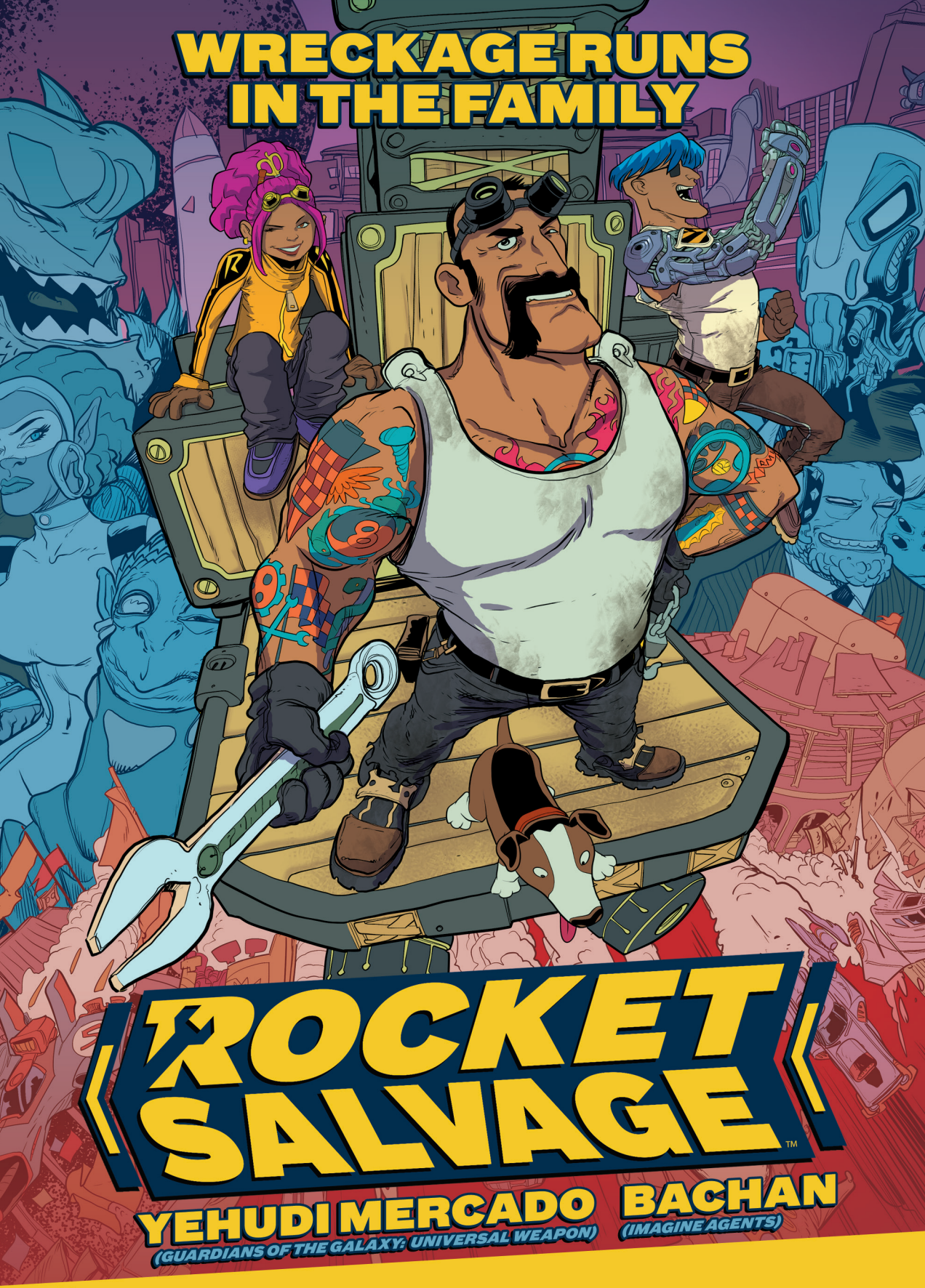

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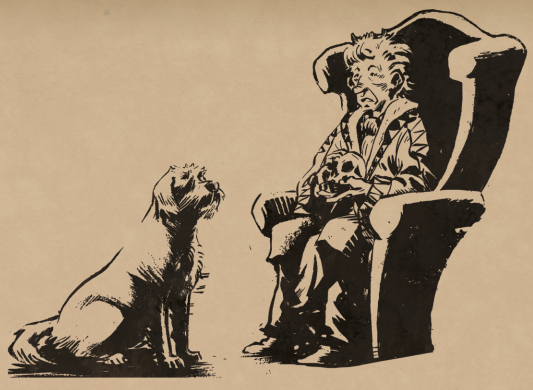

VASILISSA THE BEAUTIFUL

adapted and illustrated by JEFF STOKELY

Adapted from an unproduced THE STORYTELLER teleplay from The Jim Henson Company Archives, this final tale follows young Vasilissa as she is bullied by her stepmother and stepsisters. When she is forced to venture deep into the woods surrounding their home, she encounters the fabled Russian witch, Baba Yaga.

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Tale Four of Four

Witches

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